

Blessed Are Those Who Die in the Lord

Revelations 14:12-13

It was Christmas, and all the family was gathered together. But this was not your traditional Christmas family gathering. There were no presents under the tree. The children weren't playing in the woods behind grandma and grandpa's house. There was no Christmas dinner planned. Grandma hadn't made countertops full of Christmas goodies. We weren't having the traditional oyster stew on Christmas Eve. We weren't going to church for communion.

Instead we were all crammed into a tiny room. Grandpa lay in bed, unresponsive as tubes entered and exited his body in a variety of places. The glowing green readouts on the screens painted a dreary picture, and the staccato beeps and sounds kept dirge-like rhythm.

This is not how Christmas is supposed to be. Everyone keeping watch in a hospital room. That's not how this Christmas was supposed to be. Grandma and Grandpa had just returned from a trip of a lifetime a couple of weeks before. They'd gone on a long-planned cruise with lifelong friends, Ivan and Delores. Ivan happened to be an elder in my church. The trip was great. Ivan and Delores told me the stories. They showed me the pictures. Grandma and grandpa had a great time.

So why were we here? It turns out that Grandpa picked up legionnaires disease on the cruise. His body was weak and vulnerable to this otherwise survivable illness. You see, we'd been here once before. A few years earlier, grandpa had suffered a major heart attack and underwent emergency quadruple bypass surgery at St. John's hospital in Joplin. The whole family was called in. The prognosis wasn't good.

It seemed like endless hours of waiting. My family jokes in the presence of death. My uncle, who lived in Republic at the time, was the last to arrive, even though he lived the closest. When my dad and sister asked what took him so long, he said he had to stop by the house to make sure his initials were on everything. Everyone else in the waiting room thought we were cold and heartless.

A steady stream of ministers and Bible college professors came to visit. My grandfather spent a career in ministry planting churches, taking missions trips, and for nearly 20 years taught at Ozark Christian College. The rule was only one visitor at a time unless it was his pastor. After 20 or so ordained pastors stopped by for a visit, the doctor burst in and said, "I don't care if you're the Pope, only one visitor at a time. Slowly grandpa recovered.

He would start preaching again. He and grandma would travel. They eventually moved to Lebanon, but grandpa would never be the same. He didn't have the same spring in his step; the same twinkle in his eye.

This time, though, it didn't look like he'd pull through. The doctors said they had done all they could do, as his vitals continued to drop. If things continued this way, some difficult decisions would have to be made.

In Revelation 14:12-13, we read a passage that contains what my sound like a rather strange promise. This is a transitional text. It ties two different visionary elements together. It provides a bit of narration in between.

Immediately preceding this text there are three angels that deliver messages to "those who dwell on earth." They announce impending judgment and the need to repent now before it was too late. Immediately after our text we see judgment come in the form of two harvests and the whole earth is collected. Jesus collects the righteous grain to himself, and the unrighteous grapes are gathered and thrown into the winepress of God's wrath. Tying these two sets of visions together is our text.

"Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'That they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'"

Someone says, "I've got some bad news and some good news. Which would you like first?" Some of us are bad news first people. Let's get the hard stuff out of the way. We rip the band aid off in one quick swipe. Others of us want the good news first. We need to soften the blow. We like a nice sugar coating over the bitter pill.

The good news is you're blessed. We talked about the meaning of this word "blessing" last week. It is a happiness that goes beyond the worries and concerns of life. It is fullness and contentment that comes because you have been touched by the favor of God. You're blessed. The bad news: you're going to die. This seems to be an odd pairing: blessed death. Happy death. There's a reason we don't gather at funeral homes and hospitals and sing, "Happy Death Day to You." That would just be weird and insensitive.

What would make John say this? How can we blessed in death? How did this bring comfort to John's readers in the seven churches, and how does it bring comfort to us? The text basically presents three stages or steps to this blessing: Endurance, death, and rest. It's really a brief outline of the Christian life: First, they endure. Second, the die, and third, the enter eternal rest.

I. Endurance

The blessing begins with endurance. A call to endure is not a popular message. We want immediate results and instant relief. We pop pills that start working almost right away. We can cook rice

in a minute, and we can do our banking with the press of a few buttons. Sadly, too much of this thinking has crept into our faith.

We have an ATM spirituality where we think a prayer and a couple of Bible verses should make our problems go away. Preaching sermons on endurance is not a way to gather large crowds. I'd do much better if I preached three easy steps to a happy marriage. 2 Simple principles for a secure financial future. A Biblical foods to increase plate size but decrease pant size. Spiritual victory rarely comes in three easy steps. Rather, it comes with great effort through, as Philippians 2:12 says, fear and trembling. The Christian life is one of endurance. Spiritual growth can be a grueling slog to the finish line.

The word John uses here means to bear up under pressure. It is to be steadfast, to persevere. It is to go on without giving up or giving in. Jesus promised us a better life, not an easier life. We can't forget the difference. John connects endurance here with keeping the commandments God.

This means we continue to forgive even when it's not easy, even when we don't feel like it. This means that we love others, even when they are quite unlovely. This means we continue to guard our speech even when everyone around us is speaking filth. This means we hold true to our standards of purity even when everyone else is doing it. We keep going, even when the marriage is tough. We keep going even when the finances are tight. We keep going, even when other give up. We keep going. We endure.

John also connects endurance with keeping our faith in Jesus. The world may mock us and scoff at us, yet we still believe. The world may tell us to sit down and shut up, yet we still believe. Late night comedy shows may make jokes at our expense, like Saturday Night Live did last week with a bit Mocking the movie God's Not Dead 2, yet still we believe. Workplace rules and government regulation may pressure us to keep our faith in the shadows, yet still we believe. We do not waver. We do not change, We do not capitulate. We do not compromise. We endure.

Think of what this call to endure meant for John's readers. Last week we talked about how many of them were facing economic hardship because they would not worship idols. Some of them were facing prison time. Some were even facing death. For us endurance means putting up with mean things said on Facebook, or being the barb of some comments at work, or maybe for us it is that we keep grinding away in the face of very challenging circumstances, but for many of John's readers, endurance was a life and death decision.

Let me give you an idea of what endurance meant for these people. This comes from a letter written from Pliny, he was the Roman governor of Bithyina, right next door to where the seven churches in Revelation are. He wrote this to Emperor Trajan just a few years after revelation was written. He was

explaining how he was handling the persecution of Christians, and asking for the emperor's guidance in the matter.

In the meantime, I have handled those who have been denounced to me as Christians as follows: I asked them whether they were Christians. Those who responded affirmatively I have asked a second and third time, under threat of the death penalty. If they persisted [Same word used here as in Revelation 14:12] in their confession, I had them executed.

Does that give you some perspective on endurance? I'm not saying this to belittle the battles you're fighting. They're real, and they're hard. Too often though we are looking for a way out rather than a way through. We want Jesus to make our problems smaller, rather than realize He wants to make us bigger. We need to pray for the strength and wisdom to endure- to go on without giving up or giving in. In Revelation 2:10, to the Christians in Smyrna, Jesus promises the crown of life to those who are faithful unto death. This basically means the same thing as "Til death do us part" in marriage vows. It means we will keep following Jesus until the day we die. It doesn't matter how that death comes—persecution, old age, an accident, sickness. The question is did you endure in your faith until the day you died?

II. Death

This brings us to the second step in John's blessing: death. Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. Hear this message the way John's readers may have heard it. If you were following Jesus until the day you died, no matter how bad that death was, no matter the circumstances, you are blessed, and there is nothing or no one that can take that blessing away from you.

One of the features of the book of Revelation and all of apocalyptic literature really is the idea of dualism. That is there are two opposing forces or ideas at work: good and evil, God and Satan. We see an ethical and moral dualism throughout Revelation. You are either hot or cold. There are those who worship the Lamb and those who worship the beast. You have been sealed with the name of the Lamb and the Father or you have received the mark of the beast. Your name is written in the Lamb's book of life or it isn't. There are those who are allowed into the gates of the New Jerusalem and there are those outside who cannot come in. There are no third options. You can't choose C.

When it comes to death, here's how that dualism works. Everyone dies. Either you die in Christ or you don't. Either death comes as a blessing, or it comes as judgment. John is telling the Christians in these seven churches, and he's telling you and me this morning, that if you are in Christ, you have nothing to fear in death, because death will only bring blessing. For those in Christ death is a good thing.

But it's more than that. It isn't just that we have nothing to fear in death. We have something to hope for in death, something to look forward to. In the early to mid-1800s spiritual revival swept across

the American frontier. One of the leading voices of that revival was a Scottish preacher named Alexander Campbell, who along with several other notable preachers sought to break away from the militant denominationalism of the day and build a faith on simple New Testament Christianity. Their efforts became what is known as the Restoration Movement and our church traces its roots to that movement. We're not about manmade doctrines or labels, just the simple preaching and teaching of Scripture.

Alexander Campbell was a renowned debater in his day. Debates would attract huge crowds, they'd be printed as booklets and widely read. His most famous debate was with atheist Robert Owen. Owen was the Christopher Hitchens or Bill Maher of his day. Before one of these debates, Mr. Owen visited Campbell at his farm so they could make arrangements. As they walked and talked about the farm, they came across the Campbell family burial plot. Owen remarked, "There is one advantage I have over the Christian— I am not afraid to die..."

"Well," answered Mr. Campbell, "You say you have no fear in death; have you any hope in death?"

After a long pause, Owen replied, "No."

It is one thing to die. It is something else entirely to die with a sure and certain hope.

Let me show you why John says we have nothing to fear in death. Chapter 14 opens with a vision of the 144,000. This rather cryptic number has been the source of a lot of speculation. Certain cults and false teachings have taken this in some rather strange directions. I want to briefly explain how I see this and what the significance is. Like the vision as a whole, the numbers of Revelation are used in a highly symbolic sense. Seven is a number of completeness or fullness. Seven churches represent all the churches. The seven spirits of God or the seven-fold spirit of God represent the fullness of the Spirit. Seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls represent the fullness of God's Judgment. Four is a number connected with the physical world. This is derived from the four points of a compass or the four seasons. In Revelation we have the four corners of the earth or the four winds. Three is the number of God— Father, Son and Spirit; holy, holy, holy; who was, and is, and is to come; glory and power and honor.

Twelve is a number that throughout Revelation represents the people of God. You have the twelve tribes of Israel. You have the twelve disciples. In chapter 12, OT Israel is portrayed as a woman with a crown of 12 stars. Twelve is so integral to John's description of the New Jerusalem that the number itself appears 12 times in the original Greek. On the 12 gates of the city are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the twelve foundations are written the names of the 12 disciples of Christ. So you have the people of God of the OT and the people of God in the NT. You multiply them

together and you get 144. Interestingly, the measurements of the New Jerusalem are 12,000 stadia by 12,000 stadia. The wall, we are told, is 144 cubits high.

10 and its multiples portray a specified but undetermined amount of time or numbers. 10 represents a small number or a short period of time. For instance, the church in Smyrna would be tested for a period of 10 days. The number 1,000 represented a vast number or a long period of time. The cattle on a 1,000 hills belong to him. A day is like a 1,000 years and a 1,000 years are like a day.

All of this comes into play in the number 144,000. It is a number that I believe represents all the people of God. $12 \times 12 \times 1000$. This is a number that represents the people of God. Revelation drops plenty of clues that these are simply God's people and not some special, select group of people. First we are told that they have been sealed by God on their foreheads. Later, we're told that all believers in the New Jerusalem are sealed in this manner. They are called "servants of God," and "the redeemed of the earth." Elsewhere, such terms refer to all of God's people.

Now, here's the cool part. The 144,000 are first introduced in chapter 7. In chapter 13, Satan attacks God's people with the beast from the sea and the beast from the land. He throws everything he's got at God's people. 13:7 says, "*It was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.*"

Chapter 14 opens with another vision of the 144,000. "*Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*" The number is still 144,000. Not 143,999. Jesus has not lost one of them. He has kept all that belong to him. This is Jesus' promise of John 10:28, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." John is telling his readers "Do the math. No matter what happens to you on earth, Jesus will not lose one of you in heaven."

The Apostle Paul put it this way:

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

III. Rest

The death of a Christian is never in vain. Do you get that? Do you understand that? No matter what was lost here. No matter how hard that loss is for us still on this side of death, what is gained on the other side is always far greater. It is always a blessing. It is always a cause of rejoicing for another of the Lord's has come home. They hear the words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

The final stage of this blessing is that they enter into their eternal rest. Verse 13 says, "*Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.'*" Rest. True

rest. Ultimate rest. To refresh and renew. This is just to rest the body, it is to rest the heart and mind and soul. This is the rest that only comes when everything is done, everything is safe, and everything is secure.

This rest is only for those who die in the Lord. Those who worshipped the beast get no such rest. Look at verse 11, *“And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have not rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”* There is no blessing in death for those who do not know the Lord.

Heaven will be a rest from our labors. The word used for labors here referred to the beatings endured by a beast of burden. In addition to the promise of rest, is the assurance that our deeds follow us to heaven. The idea here is that our hard work and suffering on earth is over, but none of it has been in vain. Our deeds accompany us to heaven. Persevering in our faith on earth can be wearisome, but we must keep in mind the promised rest. Eternity will recognize that which was ignored on earth. Heaven will remember all that was forgotten. What no one noticed on earth will be front-page news in Heaven.

This is more than just a break at the end of the day, but we still have a lot to do tomorrow. There’s a deadline looming, and you’re not sure if you’ll get it done in time. You sleep that night, but your mind is filled with thoughts of all that remains unfinished. No, this is the rest of a job well done. You finished early and under budget. This the rest of that first night of vacation where you have nowhere to go the next day. Nowhere to be. Nothing that has to be done. The alarm doesn’t have to be set. No one is going to call. Email doesn’t have to be checked. You can turn off you cell phone. You can turn off your computer. You can rest. For all of eternity.

There we all were crammed into my grandfather’s hospital room at Christmas. My grandfather lay unresponsive and the numerous wires and computers beeped and whirred as they seemingly counted down his life slowly slipping away. My dad opened his Bible and read Luke 2, the Christmas story. We all held hands and we began to sing Christmas carols. O Come, All Ye Faithful. Joy to the World. Silent Night.

This is just as my grandfather would have wanted it. One by one doctors, nurses, and hospital staff squeezed in and joined us as we celebrated the birth of Jesus. It was there in that crammed hospital room that I was struck with one extraordinary, amazing truth. There is a life here, that death cannot take away.